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Layers of Meaning

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Layers of Meaning

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Table of Contents

Artist Statement	iii
Introduction.....	1
Aesthetics	1
Artistic Influences	3
Artistic Process	5
The New Approach	6
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	12
Appendix.....	13
List of Images	13
Images	14
Resume.....	20

Artist Statement

My artwork reflects my search for my own artistic voice. I choose to live an examined life, with the intention of growing consciously into a self-actualized individual. As an aspiring artist, I proceed equipped with a paintbrush as well. My search has led me to discover new materials and techniques and my structured self-reflection has uncovered a new source of inspiration. I now combine the layering of art materials with layers of personal meaning. My work has an autobiographical theme and I have infused the narrative with my sense of humor. Working so intimately with my own personal history and visually expressing myself by combining multiple techniques has transformed my understanding of myself as an artist and a person.

Layers of Meaning

Introduction

I have always known I was born to be an artist but various detours on life's path and more practical concerns have prevented me from pursuing a career as a professional painter. I graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) with an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts, and the University of Maryland with an undergraduate degree in Art Education. However, the decision to become a wife and then a mother and the responsibilities that accompany these choices sent me in the direction of art instructor, freelance cartoonist, and illustrator, not fine artist. I have always anticipated a time in the future when I would get serious about my calling and dedicate myself to creating meaningful work on a regular basis.

I took a couple of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program classes offered through VCU to investigate if this was a suitable way for me to develop as a practicing artist. Almost immediately I was reconnected to my artist self, slowly regaining the skills I had honed many years before. However, I now had the inner wisdom acquired from decades of life experience that helped elevate me from a painter to an artist. I was finally able to generate ideas for my artwork from the personal introspection of being a wife and mother. The MIS-IAR Program enabled me to consistently make art while expanding my knowledge of technique and materials in an invigorating atmosphere of fellow teachers on a similar journey.

Aesthetics

I decided to find inspiration by using my own personal history in an autobiographical fashion. I have undergone deep self-study over the past ten years and decided to address it

within my artwork. The ideas that I choose to paint tend to be vivid memories from my past that evoke strong sensory recollection. They are usually images that recur in my mind from time to time, and they are coupled with a strong emotion or significant event. In addition, I decided to utilize my humor and cartooning skills that I had developed for years as a freelance cartoonist. Using my early life as inspiration, I painted several pieces that contained a main subject as well as surrounding vignettes. These works satisfied me artistically and intellectually. I realized that my art was most satisfying to me when it contained multiple layers of meaning.

I began to incorporate other media and techniques with paint. I found that transfer techniques often had unpredictable results. I reconsidered the uncertain outcome of the image transfer as something serendipitous to respond to, and I executed my painting on top of it. As I worked with the paint and transfers, areas would show through from beneath adding a visual complexity that I had not obtained before. It became unclear to the viewer what process was involved to create the image and I liked this additional level of mystery. Once I surrendered my expectation of a specific outcome, my work became more open ended and more satisfying to create.

My work presently continues to unfold in layers. It is comprised of layers of meaning, and now, actual layers of materials. I begin with an initial idea of the narrative subject of the painting and then loosely proceed by building a visual underpainting of collage and image transfer. Once done, I apply paint to subdue the colors and starkness of the applied imagery so that it does not overpower the sequential layer of paint. I then map out my next layer, the image, in paint. I might add printed imagery as well, and have used linoleum and rubber stamps to add decorative components to areas that seem void of visual interest. I work to visually balance the top layer with those underneath using paint and glazes, so that the work appears to be an

integrated image. Once satisfied with the appearance of the image, I further unify the surface with collage or additional materials such as beads.

Artistic Influences

As a younger artist, I studied and admired early American portraiture. American portraiture available to the common person prior to 1840 was often painted by itinerant artists who were untrained in formal art. Because of this, compositions are sometimes flattened looking and the perspective is often skewed. Ammi Phillips (1788-1865) was a New England artist who painted many portraits similar to *Girl in a Red Dress* (c. 1830). In this piece he employed stylistic motifs such as costuming and props that were repeated throughout his works. I embraced the simplicity and symbolic motifs early American portrait painters brought to their subject matter.

Early American folk art is another source of inspiration for my work. One such artist I admired was Edward Hicks (1780-1849). His primitive, untrained stylization of animals and people in *Peaceable Kingdom* (1826) caught my attention. He typically crowds the picture plane with as much information as he can. I also noticed that he would often include writing in the form of an inspirational quote along the face of the frame. I have created frames specifically for pieces of art that contain collaged words reflecting the meaning of the image. Folk art often presents not only an image for the viewer to enjoy but a rich visual narrative that gives a perceptive viewer much more information about the subject or situation depicted. I have also embraced the tendency toward folk art's non-expressive brushstroke that leaves the picture surface universally smooth, so that the viewer remains focused on the image and not distracted by the paint handling.

My work has been strongly influenced by the work of the more contemporary Lowbrow

art movement. Lowbrow art is an underground art movement that originated in the 1970's in California and contains a wide variety of styles that incorporate cartooning and levity, often with a political bent. The artwork often comments on aspects of contemporary culture with sarcasm and humor. The Lowbrow movement also questions the differentiation of art into categories such as *high art*, *low art*, *fine art*, and *folk art*. The work itself, although widely varying in style, shares a tendency toward accomplished technical skill as well as featuring narrative subject matter. Artist Mark Ryden (1963-) is considered a Lowbrow artist. He has created his own exquisitely painted symbolic language. His technique involves multiple oil glazes over neutrally colored underpainting, reminiscent of Italian Renaissance techniques. His painting, *The Debutante* (1998), features a young woman in a formal dress. Her gown is comprised of Ryden's recurrent symbols, which include large cuts of meat and Abraham Lincoln's portrait. I have been collecting my own symbolic imagery through personal dream study and Ryden's paintings inspired me to use my own visual language in my work.

My own work addresses some of the same issues explored by the diverse Lowbrow movement, particularly its questioning of the definition of fine art in our contemporary culture. The contemporary art world places more value currently on self-expression than it does on technical skill and traditional concepts of beauty. It goes so far as to regard more representational work with disdain and elevates the conceptual and confrontational. I have continually questioned these ideas as I have examined the value and purpose of making fine art and its relevance to the everyday life of an average middle class American. My art not only embraces the ideas of traditional aesthetic beauty but it also includes a humorous or ironic narrative to prompt the viewer to reflect on the image and my message. The narrative subject matter of my paintings requires deliberation on behalf of the viewer, and I use my technical skill

as a painter and illustrator as a tool to warrant their further attention.

Artistic Process

When I returned to painting I picked up where I had left off earlier but I was open to moving in a new direction. I decided to begin telling my own life story in images and started simply enough, at the beginning. However, I continued to broaden my knowledge of contemporary art and realized I was at liberty to tell my story using a cartoon-infused style. Ideas came easily as I painted in formats of smaller cartoon scenes within a larger framework. I caught the first glimpses of something that felt uniquely mine. I painted sometimes using oil paint and sometimes using acrylics and built up layers of imagery within a single canvas.

Traditional printmaking by itself was not immediately suited to my new way of working. However, photo transfer served as a bridge that allowed me to combine painting, printmaking, and photography with immediate satisfaction. Photo transfer techniques often generate unpredictable results and this required me to broaden my definition of success with the outcome of each effort. My understanding of process was profoundly changed and I altered my concept of what was visually pleasing. This new perspective led me to work in dialogue with a piece of art, relinquishing the tight control I had always maintained over my image outcomes. I now approached my art as more of a journey with an unknown destination as opposed to a predetermined image that I would arrive at, no matter what. Learning to have a flexible response toward unexpected outcomes both in art and life has profound implications for me as an artist and as a person.

The New Approach

I initially had a glimpse of my new direction when I made the painting *Madonna of the John Deere* (Appendix, 1). I was painting a modern version of the traditional pose of a woman looking adoringly at her child as she cradles him in her arms. However, the object of my American woman's deep affection was her beloved miniature French poodle, and she was holding him while riding her John Deere tractor. I built the picture frame as a component of the piece. I assembled wooden shapes to build up the frame surface and carved foam shapes that served as embellished corners. I covered the foam with plaster and then painted the entire frame gold. The four faces and sides of the frame are covered with a collage of coupons and advertisements for everyday consumer products. After varnishing the frame with polyurethane, many of the ads became transparent and a layering effect was evident. This was a direction that interested me, although at this time the layers were on the frame and not in the image area itself. That would soon change when I began exploring image transfers.

The next composition was an autobiographical painting entitled *Brandy, You're a Fine Girl* (Appendix, 2). The title refers to a pop song from the 1970's about a barmaid. I developed this piece by first creating a foundation layer on the canvas which consisted of photo transfers. I also collaged words that related to the subject of the painting such as "love" and "ocean". I illustrated a portion of the lyrics by depicting a young woman peering out a weathered glass window, clutching a locket she wears around her neck from her lover who is out at sea. Using acrylic gel medium, I composed the face by transferring skin-colored fragments of paper collected from a magazine. I then similarly transferred a patchwork of magazine color fragments to create the window panes. Each layer of transfers I added created a result that needed to be visually balanced by the succeeding imagery. By either subduing or accentuating the addition, I

created a visually harmonious and integrated image upon which more layers could be added. I applied acrylic paint over the transfer imagery to further define the woman's features and skin color. To create a weathered effect, I also glazed the window panes and painted the frame of the window. I completed my collage work by adding the "OPEN" sign in the lower right-hand corner and muted it with a wash of white acrylic. Finally, I hand-painted the lyrics in calligraphy above the image of the lady. I added this text in a sheer pigment over the image to further evoke the wistful emotions that the song had sparked in me as a young girl.

Once I felt confident with my acrylic gel medium canvas transfer techniques, I moved on to large sheets of rag paper, as in *Tree of Life* (Appendix, 3). The tree of life occurs frequently as a subject in early American art, perhaps the most famous being the tree created by Hannah Cohoon (1788-1864), a Shaker woman who was inspired by the Holy Spirit during prayer to create the image. I created my own tree by reflecting on the family members who have come before me to shape the psychological "tree" that I grew up in.

The absorbency and smooth surface of the rag paper challenged me with unexpected results. I applied hot press transfers of old photographs of people in my life to establish the initial surface, and then layered transparent glazes of raw umber acrylic over it to subdue the colors. Then, using the acrylic gel medium transfer process, I created a rough looking bark surface from fragments of brown-colored magazine pages. The foundation layer of old photos of people from my past served as a guide for the placement of the subsequent tree leaves and the branches, made up of more magazine pages. I finally used individual letters cut from magazine pages to collage a tree-inspired Bible quote that is significant to me. The topmost layer is embellished with glass beads and collaged magazine imagery lending a decorative flourish of intense color and sparkle to its appearance. A layer of varnish helped secure the pieces and

provides an even gloss to many disparate parts.

In my next piece, I introduced a linoleum block print into my layering process. *Durga* (Appendix, 4) is a work based on the traditional image of a many-armed Hindu goddess who is the embodiment of the feminine force. In each of Durga's hands she brandishes a weapon. I translated this image into a self-portrait of myself as a teenager. In my multiple hands I brandish a blow dryer, a razor blade, a bottle, a cigarette, a cosmetic brush, and a hand mirror, all tools of my adolescent self. My first step was to design a 12" x 9" inch page of patterning inspired by traditional Hindu art that would serve as the background to the rest of the image. I then transferred the patterned design to heat sensitive transfer paper and applied the transfer sheets multiple times using acrylic gel medium over the entire surface of the rag paper. I then muted the vivid colors of the pattern transfers with a brown acrylic glaze to make them visually recede. In keeping with Hindu art, I painted a black and gold acrylic border design along the perimeter of the transfer area. Finally, I printed the linoleum plate of the Hindu goddess over the patterned area using oil-based speedball ink. To accentuate the design patterns contained within the printed image, I painted the border detail with black and gold acrylic paint. This unified the overall color scheme of the piece. My final layer consisted of loosely painted blue calligraphy that covers the area surrounding the figure. The decorative writing is of thoughts I recalled from my teenage years that could be deciphered by a perceptive viewer.

I continued with the layering process to enrich the surface imagery on one of the later pieces that I created. The painting entitled *TEACH!* (Appendix, 5) began as a blank 24" x 18" gessoed canvas. My initial layer over the white gessoed surface was image transfers of pages from a 1910 McGuffey Reader, alluding to my family's many generations of teachers. Using a gesso transfer process, I also collaged several simple words from a current newspaper such as

“cat“ and “read.“ I applied a neutral glaze to mute the stark contrast of the black and white page transfers, and then painted the image of the teacher with vivid colors in a cartooned style over the background. To create the appearance of multiple student heads crowded around the teacher, I carved a linoleum plate of a head and printed it repeatedly using black acrylic paint. I filled in the printed face outlines with a transparent glaze and then unified the negative spaces between the crowd of heads by painting multi-colored acrylic glazes in a patchwork fashion. Using a traditional motif common in American folk art, I created a border around the edge of the canvas with a quote from the philosopher, Socrates (469-399 B.C.). I used rubber letter stamps and acrylic paint to express his thought that ironically bemoans the characteristics of young people in his day by observing they “contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers” (Patty, 277). As a currently employed teacher I am comforted by the thought that little has changed since ancient Greece. The crowding of the canvas with layers of imagery, information, and wording reflect the attributes of American folk art I have adopted in my own work.

After an introduction to bookmaking I created an accordion style book. I created an alphabet book with each letter representing a concept from my adolescence. I made a Styrofoam plate for each letter and printed it on a piece of paper that would later be glued onto the accordion folded paper. For example, the letter “A” is depicted as a wine bottle symbolizing alcohol, the letter “T” is depicted with a telephone receiver, and “Q” is a crown for the Queen of England. I made a black ink print of each letter with the images appearing as white outlines. I hand-colored the lines of each print with colored pencil to add interest and visual clarity. Once completed, I glued each letter print onto its appropriate page in the book using photo corners. I then created the covers of the book using collage on rag paper. My fifth grade school picture is

on the front cover, surrounded by my full name spelled out with letters cut from magazine pages. I used a laminating material to protect the covers and I secured ribbon to both covers to tie around the book once it was closed. When the book is displayed standing up, the entire alphabet can be read and the book's covers can be seen simultaneously.

Working with narrative imagery and layered media has broadened my potential as an artist and profoundly changed my work. I slowly warmed to the open ended nature of this creative process, and my most recent works now begin with only a general idea of what the outcome will be. Because I continued to explore various materials and their application, each piece is unique but shares general qualities of transparent layering, glazes and washes, and narrative subject matter.

Conclusion

My work for many years was cartooning and representational painting and I struggled to understand the purpose of making art that seemed trivial and devoid of deeper meaning. I even began to question the value of art in our world in the first place and the practicality of the creative life. I brought my frustrations with me as I began my MIS-IAR classes and they gradually were diminished as I continued my work in the graduate program. Once I was shown the techniques that enabled me to work in layers of materials and combined media, my art making process became a dialogue of layering and then visual integration. Combined with the narrative subject matter, I now achieved the meaningful artwork I had previously sought.

Another significant aspect to this process was working alongside other artists who also worked as teachers and had additional responsibilities as well. The willingness of the faculty and other student artists to share their techniques and discoveries was inspiring and motivating. I

have seldom encountered a more generous group of people, and my growth as an artist was increased exponentially in this setting.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned came as I realized when I was constantly combining, layering, and revising my artwork that I was working in response to it as opposed to working on it. Artwork then begets more artwork and leads the artist in unknown directions endlessly. I may approach a work with my preconceived idea but I have learned to let the work unfold on its own with careful reflection and less mindless execution. Each direction I have explored inevitably leads to many others.

My early path as an artist equipped me with the technical abilities I needed to create images competently, and my time in the graduate program helped me to find a voice with which to express myself artistically. Now my work is created with layers of narrative meaning coupled with physical layering of multiple media. Working in this fashion has helped me to create a unified body of work. However, more importantly to me, each work stands independently imbued with its own meaning that contributes to a larger narrative whole. My desire to express my unique personal perspective and understanding of life through my artwork will continue to be fulfilled as I further explore the infinite possibilities of mixed media layering and image transfers.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Madonna of the John Deere*, oil paint and collaged frame, 24" x 18"x3", 2008.
- Figure 2. *Brandy, You're a Fine Girl*, acrylic paint and mixed media, 20" x 16", 2008.
- Figure 3. *Tree of Life*, acrylic paint and mixed media, 28" x 22", 2009.
- Figure 4. *Durga*, linoleum print, acrylic paint and mixed media, 28" x22", 2009.
- Figure 5. *TEACH!*, acrylic paint and mixed media, 24" x 18", 2009.
- Figure 6. *My Alphabet Book* (Open View), printmaking, collage, colored pencil, 7" x 5" x 40" (Closed Book 7" x 5" x 1/2"), 2010.



Figure 1. *Madonna of the John Deere*, oil paint and collaged frame, 24" x 18" x 3", 2008.



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Figure 3. *Tree of Life*, acrylic paint and mixed media, 28" x 22", 2009.



Figure 4. *Durga*, linoleum print, acrylic paint and mixed media, 28" x 22", 2009.



Figure 5. *TEACH!*, acrylic paint and mixed media, 24" x 18", 2009



Figure 6. *My Alphabet Book* (Open View), printmaking, collage, colored pencil, 7" x 5" x 40"
(Closed Book 7" x 5" x ½"), 2010.

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EDUCATION

- 2010 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 1988 Bachelor of Science, Art Education, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
- 1985 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2008-Present Art Teacher, Taylor Middle School, Fauquier County, VA
- 2000-2008 Art Teacher, St. John Catholic School, K-8, Warrenton, VA
- 1994-1999 Art Teacher, Art League School, 9-teen, Alexandria, VA
- 1990-1992 Art Teacher, Hayfield Secondary School, grades 6-12, Fairfax County, VA
- 1988-1990 Art Teacher, Suitland High School, Prince Georges County, MD

FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR – HIGHLIGHTS

- 2000 Cartoon image published in Hanson, Mark Victor. *Chicken Soup for the Parent's Soul*, USA: Health Communications, 2000, 294.
- 1999 Cartoon images published in Hanson, Mark Victor. *Chicken Soup for the College Soul*, USA: Health Communications, 1999, 51,63.
- 1998 Cartoon Images published in *Ms. Magazine*, (September/October 1998): 5 ,6.
- 1995-1998 Freelance Illustrator, Science Scope. Arlington, VA.

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2008-Present Yearbook Sponsor, Taylor Middle School, Warrenton, VA
- 1998 First Night Alexandria participant, Paint-in mural of City Council Members, Alexandria, VA
- 1996 Community mural design and execution, Olympic Torch reception, United Way, Alexandria, VA
- 1992-1998 Freelance Illustrator, Science Scope Magazine
- 1994 Community Outreach, Cross-curriculum Art Instruction, Friends of the Torpedo Factory, Alexandria, VA

EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 "Joan 3:16", Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Highland School Center for the Arts, Warrenton, VA
- 2007 *Art in the Barn Holiday Show*, Lord Willing Farm, Culpeper, VA
- 2006 *Teacher and Student Show*, Middle St. Gallery, Washington, VA
- 2006 *Spring Student Show*, Lord Fairfax Community College, Warrenton, VA
- 2005 *Student/Teacher Art Show*, St. John School, Warrenton, VA
- 2005 *Grace Episcopal Spring Art Show*, The Plains, VA